DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 374 246 CE 067 152

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TITLE	Marketing Means Business. Interchange No. 28.
INSTITUTION	Scottish Office Education Dept., Edinburgh. Research and Intelligence Unit.
REPORT NO	ISSN-0969-613X
PUB DATE	94
NOTE	13p.
AVAILABLE FROM	SOED Dissemination Officer, Scottish Council for Research in Education, 15 St. John Street, Edinburgh EH8 8JR, Scotland, United Kingdom.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Research/Technical (143)
EDRS PRICE	MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS	Foreign Countries; *Information Systems; *Marketing; Needs Assessment; Postsecondary Education; *Program Effectiveness; *Publicity; Public Relations; *School Business Relationship; *School Community Relationship; Technical Institutes; Vocational Education
IDENTIFIERS	*Scotland

ABSTRACT

A project examined information currently made available by colleges of further education in Scotland to users and the marketing strategies used. Thirty-eight of 45 colleges completed a questionnaire on current marketing practice. Other activities included focus groups and interviews with students and members of the general public and a postal survey of employers to assess the relevance and value of information to users and potential users of further education, examining how promotional material and marketing strategies affected users' and potential users' perceptions of further education, and examining the effectiveness of marketing strategies on the marketplace. Findings indicated that marketing plans were often not based on an assessment of client needs or of internal strengths or weaknesses. There was little evidence of close liaison between colleges' marketing personnel and other key management functions. Only seven colleges had marketing information systems fully in place. Only 37 percent monitored effectiveness of promotions. There was a relatively high level of communication between colleges and employers. The main channel of communication with the public was the local press (64%) followed by TV advertising (40%). The public thought colleges had changed a great deal. They felt that colleges were more modern and innovative; the staff cared about the students; and lecturers ensured the right course of study for the student. The most important factors for employers when choosing a training provider were quality of staff and their understanding of business needs. Most colleges expected further development of their marketing function in the next 2 years. (YLB)

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THE SCOTTISH OFFICE

Education Department

No 28

Marketing Means Business

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Research cannot make the decisions for policy makers and others concerned with improving the quality of education in our schools and colleges. Nor can it by itself bring about change. But it can create a better basis for decisions, by providing information and explanation about educational practice and by clarifying and challenging ideas and assumptions.

It is important that every opportunity should be taken to communicate research findings, both inside and outside the Scottish Office Education Department (SOED). Moreover, if research is to have the greatest possible impact on policy and practice, the findings need to be presented in an accessible, interesting and attractive form to policy makers, teachers, lecturers, parents and employers.

Interchange aims to further improve the Research and Intelligence Unit's (RIU) dissemination of the findings of research funded by SOED. We hope you will find that ***Interchange*** is long enough to give the flavour of the complexities, subtleties and limitations of a research study but concise enough to give a good feeling for the findings and in some cases to encourage you to obtain the full report.

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Edited and produced for the Scottish Office Education Department by the SOED Dissemination Officer at the Scottish Council for Research in Education, September 1994.

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Marketing Means Business

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Scottish Further Education Unit and KPMG

Background

There has been a discernible continuing change and progress in the way colleges of further education are marketed. The incorporation of colleges in April 1993 provided both a stimulus and an opportunity to put college marketing onto a new level. Competitive pressures from other training bodies and the changing range of opportunities at secondary schools and universities have been partly responsible for this.

This research project was commissioned by the Scottish Office Education Department in 1993 to report on current college marketing activities and their effectiveness in the marketplace.

Aims of the project

The project set out to:

- examine the information currently made available by colleges of further education in Scotland to users, and the marketing strategies employed;
- assess the relevance and value of this information to users and potential users of further education;
- examine how promotional material and marketing strategies affect users' and potential users' perceptions of further education;
- suggest ways in which the image of further education can be improved through better practice in this area;
- examine the effectiveness of college marketing strategies on the marketplace.

Approach to the research

The study was undertaken through:

- a review of current college marketing materials;
- focus groups with college marketing staff to determine issues and shape the questionnaire;
- an in-depth questionnaire on current marketing practice completed by 38 of the 45 colleges in Scotland;
- focus groups with college students and members of the public;
- face to face interviews with 200 students in locations across Scotland;
- face to face interviews with 600 members of the general public, representing the age, sex, social class and geographic location of the Scottish population;
- a postal survey of over 200 employers in Scotland.

Information on current marketing practices was collected from colleges between September and November 1993. The interviews and surveys of students, general population and employers took place between January and February 1994.

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What factors influence college marketing planning?

Most colleges were adopting the principles of marketing planning. For example, 84% had stated marketing objectives, 74% set targets for income generation and 74% had clear segmentation strategies for marketing to schools. The research, however, did highlight gaps in the marketing planning of colleges. For example, in half the colleges surveyed, clients had little influence on the planning process and marketing plans were not based on a full assessment of external influences or internal strengths or weaknesses.

College marketing plans were often not based on an assessment of client needs or of internal strengths or weaknesses.

What factors currently influence your college's marketing planning process?

Colleges should be working towards an integrated approach to planning with tactical and action plans being produced at college and department or section level. These plans should highlight strategies that match the strengths of the organisation with opportunities in the external environment.

Who in the college plans and implements marketing?

Most colleges had marketing personnel in place. However, there was no common structure for the management and implementation of college marketing. This can be explained by the differing sizes and strategic priorities of colleges.

In over 70% of colleges the marketing personnel worked closely with the college principal and senior management team. However, there was little evidence of close liaison with the related functions of quality, management information, personnel and registry staff.

There was little evidence of close liaison between colleges' marketing personnel and other key management functions.

Responsibilities for marketing followed this general pattern: senior management were most active in the areas of marketing planning and budget setting and control; marketing personnel were most active in designing and writing promotional materials, events management, and designing and placing advertisements.

Is marketing sufficiently integrated with college management in your college?

Ninety-two per cent of colleges allocated a clear budget each year to marketing. The expenditure patterns which emerged in the research suggest that over half this budget was allocated to advertising. Marketing budgets should be set on the basis of task identification, and departments or sections should also have designated budgets for reaching individual client groups.

Strategic marketing should be an integral part of college management and colleges should appoint full time marketing personnel, assisted by a dedicated administrative and secretarial resource to support the implementation of action plans stemming from the strategic marketing plan.

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What information systems are used to influence marketing plans?

Marketing intelligence can play a vital role in informing the senior management team and assist decision making in the corporate and marketing planning process. There is considerable scope for rapid development in this area as only seven colleges reported that marketing information systems were fully or almost in place. Research into the requirements of customer groups varied enormously: for example 84% of colleges undertook market research with existing students, whereas only 27% carried out market research with adults. Marketing research is the key to informed decision making and data should be gathered from all customer groups on needs, perceptions and attitudes.

Only seven colleges had marketing information systems fully (or almost) in place.

How well developed is marketing intelligence in your college?

How do colleges promote themselves?

Colleges used a wide range of promotional materials to promote courses and services (the most popular being posters, course leaflets, local press advertising, open days and exhibitions to local schools), and had clear segmentation strategies for targeting different groups. The surveys of the general population and of employers both highlighted the effectiveness of college promotional materials and activities on client groups and this should drive future planning. Selection of promotional strategies should also be based on past experience gained through monitoring the effectiveness of different activities. The research highlighted that only 37% of colleges were currently monitoring the effectiveness of promotions and the most likely technique was by a direct response mechanism. The research identified that currently the main objective of college promotion was to raise the profile of the college, with a secondary aim of providing specific information.

Only 37% of colleges currently monitor the effectiveness of promotions.

How should colleges evaluate the effectiveness of their promotional activities?

How do colleges communicate with employers?

There was a relatively high level of communication between colleges and employers, with 73% of surveyed employers having had telephone calls and 60% having received mailings of information on specific services from colleges in the last two years. The main targets tended to be the public sector and larger firms rather than small or medium sized enterprises. The mailings had relatively limited relevance — in only 25% of cases was the information considered very relevant. Newsletters tended to be regarded as an irrelevant means of communication. Most promotional activity towards employers was for what might be termed core college services — full, part time and day release courses. Less than half of companies surveyed had received information on customised training and consul-

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tancy services provided by colleges. Colleges can enhance their marketing to employers by targeting relevant services and more appropriate information.

How do colleges communicate with the general public?

The main channel of communication with the general public was the local press (64%) with the recent TV advertising for other educational institutions being mentioned by 40% of the younger age group, under 25 years, who are more receptive to TV advertising. Older age groups are more receptive to press advertising.

The survey highlighted that if people wanted to obtain information about a college or course, they preferred a direct approach, either by telephone or a visit (Table 1). This emphasises the importance of enquiry handling, with a good telephone system and trained staff, and a welcoming information desk or centre at the college.

Table 1: Method used by the general public to get information on courses and services

% of respondents

Telephone college	47
Visit college	26
Contact careers officer	20
Ask at library	19
Look in local press	17
Go to college open days	12
Contact Jobcentre	10
Ask family and friends	8

The use of open days as a form of promotion attracted a relatively low proportion of students (27%), and an even lower proportion of the general population (10%). However, those who had attended open days rated them highly.

Colleges should be aware that the methods through which people will obtain information on college services varies according to social class. Promotional strategies need to be devised accordingly. In particular, social groups ABC1, C2 were more aware of the range of methods for obtaining information than DE groups, and were more likely to use direct telephone contact or look in the local press.

College promotional material has to serve two functions in communication to the general public:

- stimulating awareness and creating a positive image of colleges;
- providing specific information on courses offered.

Most people had a clear view of what types of information they required before they approached the college for information. Indeed 70% of students decided on the course of study before seeking a college that could offer that course.

Table 2: Information which was of most importance for members of the public

% of respondents

Information on course content	88
How to go about applying	84
How the course will be taught	76
How the course will be assessed	73
Benefits of the course to individuals	67

The types of information to which the general public attached greatest importance are shown in Table 2. Of lesser importance was background information on the college and a contact name for further information (59%).

Different formats for providing this information are required. Some people, particularly the general public, wanted a general prospectus, while others, those with a clear view of the course they wished to study, required

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a specific course leaflet or information pack. Encouraging people to visit the college was seen as the most useful method of introducing people to college life. Such visits, however, must be backed up by effective written information for future reference.

What do the general public think of colleges?

Among the general public there was a clear impression that colleges of further education had changed a great deal in recent years. They felt that:

- colleges were more modern and innovative;
- staff cared about the students;
- lecturers ensured the course of study was right for the student.

Members of the public thought that a broad range of people from all walks of life attended college and most commonly those (of all ages and previous experience) seeking to retrain or get qualifications (Table 3).

Table 3: Type of person seen as likely to attend college

	% of respondents
Adults looking to improve their qualifications	74
School leavers without a job adding to their qualifications	73
Adults who have been made redundant	68
Adults who are re-training for the future	63
School leavers without sufficient results	62
People moving on to more advanced education	58
Employees of public/ private sector	43

It is interesting that people associated re-training and achieving qualifications with the unemployed or individuals rather than employees. Colleges were not seen as somewhere where employees took part in on-going education and training. The people most likely to attend colleges were thought to be 'school leavers', 'ambitious', 'young' and 'unemployed'. The main motivators for attending college were seen as gaining qualifications (69% of respondents) and improving job prospects (58%).

Across the general public, 10% thought they were very likely to attend college in the future and a further 20% were quite likely. Not surprisingly it was those in the younger age groups, under 35 years, who were most likely to contemplate attending college, as were those in ABC1 and to a lesser extent the C2 socioeconomic groupings.

One third of those who said they were unlikely to consider attending a college gave the reason that they were too old to go back to learning. A further 14% would not consider it because they were already in employment.

The people most likely to attend colleges were generally seen to be those seeking to retrain or get qualifications.

How do you think members of the public view your college?

What do employers think of colleges?

Employers said they were just as likely to use further education colleges to meet their training needs as they would private training providers and consultancies.

Employers felt that colleges had become more responsive to the needs of industry in the last two years, particularly to larger employers, and that colleges would have an increasing role to play in the vocational education and training of their workforce.

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The research identified the key factors which influenced employers' choices of external training providers. The two most important factors were:

- the quality of staff; and
- their understanding of business needs.

Following these were: the relevance of methods; knowledge of the sector; and approach to training.

The factors which employers thought very important were compared with employers' experiences of using colleges. A 'service rating' was constructed which revealed that colleges competed most effectively on three things: the ability to offer qualifications; offering a competitive price; and the quality of the resources available. To a lesser extent colleges could compete on: their reputation as training providers; the quality of staff; approach to training; and the relevance of their training methods. Colleges were less successful in competing in two key areas; understanding business needs; and specific knowledge of the industry sector.

The different factors which influenced employers in choosing external training providers could be categorised as:

- competitive edge factors — what differentiates one training provider from others (for example, understanding business needs and the quality of staff);
- core competence factors — the basic requirements for competing in the training market (for example, knowledge of the sector, relevance of methods, approach to training, reputation, quality of resources and competitive price);
- comfort factors — providing the purchaser with the comfort that if anything goes wrong with the training he or she can demonstrate the rationale for why that provider was chosen (for example, fit of style and personalities, word of mouth recommendations, brochures and advertisements, quality of environment and recognised qualifications).

The most important factors for employers when choosing a training provider were quality of staff and their understanding of business needs.

How can colleges make themselves more attractive to employers?

Further education colleges competed well in two 'core competencies', that is, quality of resources and competitive price, and in one of the 'comfort factors', that is, providing recognised qualifications. However, while competition on the basis of price and offering qualifications is appropriate for mass market education and training courses, it is not the basis upon which colleges will be able to meet the more sophisticated training needs for employers. Colleges need to develop and implement strategies aimed at improving their performance in the two areas which will provide competitive edge: understanding the needs of business; and ensuring that a high quality staff resource is maintained and developed in the future, plus having good knowledge of the sector. This is an area in which significant development is required since it was regarded by employers as a necessary core competence for external training providers.

Most employers were satisfied with their experiences in using colleges, though a significant minority of employers who had used colleges, ranging from 12% to 23% of these, indicated they were not satisfied with different aspects of their experience.

Employers who had not used further education colleges in the last two years were asked how far they thought colleges were able to provide them with a satisfactory service on these criteria. The results were broadly similar to the experiences of employers currently using colleges, with the exception that two thirds felt that colleges would not be sensitive to company needs.

A high proportion of the organisations responding, nearly three quarters, had had direct experience of colleges in the last two years, by placing students on courses. While these organisations should be regarded as existing customers to whom colleges could sell on services, only half of such customers, or 37% of all respondent organisations, had bought any customised training in the last two years.

The majority of employer organisations who said they had used customised training in the last two years (68%) reported finding it to be very relevant and only a small handful of companies found it irrelevant. Colleges therefore face an issue in how to increase the market penetration for customised training.

Further education colleges also appeared to provide relevant education and training to the students whom employer organisations have on course. The largest proportion (64%) of employers with students on courses found it to be very relevant and a further 30% found it fairly relevant.

A significant proportion of employers were involved with Scottish Vocational Qualifications (46%) and to a lesser extent Investors in People (20%) as well as flexible learning (22%). They were, however, least likely to be involved with, or be aware of, the Management Charter Initiative and Accreditation of Prior Learning.

How is the marketing role of colleges changing?

Around ninety per cent of colleges said that marketing had been given more priority in the last two years. In particular marketing had attracted more money (74%) and staff (65%). Also marketing had tended to become more centralised and corporate and less departmental (73%). There was some evidence that departments were becoming more involved in marketing (37%).

Within the next two years, most colleges (84%) expected that the marketing function would be developed further; there would be more emphasis

Most colleges expected that their marketing function would be developed further in the next two years.

What plans will your college be making to give more priority to marketing?

on researching the needs of client groups; and the marketing plan would be included within the overall college development plan.

One-third of colleges also anticipated that the status of marketing would improve and a higher proportion of the college budget would be spent on marketing. For this to occur there is obviously a need for better understanding the nature and role of marketing and the contribution to be made towards college marketing by staff at all levels, including the senior management team (Table 4).

Table 4: Proportion of colleges who thought staff had good understanding of marketing practice

	% of respondents
Senior management team	52
The board	50
Heads of section	39
Support/administration staff	16
Academic staff	13

Stemming from this research, a model of good marketing practice has been devised to guide and assist further marketing development within the further education system. This model suggests benchmarks which colleges should be aiming to achieve in five key areas:

- strategic marketing planning;
- marketing organisation and management;
- marketing information systems and marketing research;
- promotion;
- marketing training.

Full report of the survey

Further details of the survey, including the model of good practice, can be found in the full report, *Marketing Means Business*, available from the Scottish Further Education Unit, Jordanhill Campus, University of Strathclyde, Southbrae Drive, Glasgow G13 1PP. Price £12.00.

The views expressed in this paper are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the Scottish Office Education Department who funded the study.

Notes

Influences on marketing plans

Liaison between marketing personnel and other management

Developing marketing information systems

Evaluating effectiveness of promotions

The public's view of colleges

Employers' view of colleges

Developments in marketing in the next two years

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Further information

If you have views on ***Interchange*** and/or wish to find out more about RIU's research programme contact the Research and Intelligence Unit (RIU), Scottish Office Education Department, Room 4/48, New St Andrew's House, Edinburgh EH1 3SY.

Printed by Nevisprint, Fort William

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Date Filmed
February 9, 1995